

**North Carolina Department of  
Environment And Natural Resources**

**Division of Environmental Health**

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**MEMORANDUM**

**To:** Superintendents  
Child Nutrition Directors and Supervisors

**From:** Pamela Jenkins, Nurse-Epidemiologist  
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**Date:** June 10, 2002

**Subject:** Food Brought into Schools from Non-Commercial Sources

Last winter, an outbreak of Escherichia coli O157:H7 (E. coli) occurred at a Robeson County School. The outbreak involved over 40 elementary school children (the ones most at risk for serious damage from this organism) and spread to some 200 members of the community. Four children were hospitalized with kidney damage. The outbreak was investigated by the Robeson County Health Department, the General Communicable Disease Branch of the NC Department of Health & Human Services and a team from the National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The source of the outbreak was traced to a "tasting" event held in the school gym and the indicated food was brought in and prepared by a local community member.

We know of at least one suit being brought against the Robeson County School System in connection with this outbreak. The firm handling the case is out of Seattle and specializes in E. coli cases.

In response to the outbreak, we have learned that there are many events with home-prepared foods being held at schools. In order to protect the children within the schools and secondarily, to limit liability to the schools, **we would suggest that, in general, schools should not allow anyone to bring in foods from non-commercial sources.**

**High risk foods are foods of animal origin (eggs, meat, milk, etc.).** Additionally, the number one cause of foodborne illness in the United States, year-after-year, **is improper temperature control.** So foods that need refrigeration or hot holding (meat and cooked vegetable salads, milk, meat, etc.) carry the most risk.

**Under no circumstances should any school allow the following food items to be brought in from homes:**

- **ground beef products (hamburgers, casseroles, or ground beef containing dishes)**
- **venison in any form**
- **unpasteurized milk or juices or products made with unpasteurized milk**  
( such as butter, cheese or ice cream)

**as these foods have traditionally been involved in E. coli outbreaks and young children are particularly susceptible to this organism.**

Limiting classroom birthday and holiday celebrations to commercial foods may be problematic. Since some home-made foods carry a lower risk, the following drier foods could be accepted with relatively small risk for classroom parties:

cookies

cakes with commercial frosting (avoid cream fillings)

fruit pies (avoid cream and custard pies and pastries -their risk is much higher)

bread not containing pieces of fruit or vegetables

canned, bottled and boxed drinks.

Any fresh fruits or vegetables brought in should be from commercial sources and washed thoroughly before being eaten or be fruits from which the peel is removed prior to eating (bananas, tangerines, etc.).

If you have a food booth manned by volunteers on the school grounds, seek a permit from the local health department for the stand. There are permits for permanent and temporary food booths. This will ensure that the stand is checked for the proper equipment and operation and is inspected periodically by the local health department. Many local health departments teach a food safety class. The manager of the food booth should attend this training. If they are serving ground beef products such as hamburgers, the booth **MUST** have a food thermometer and the thermometer must be used to assure that the hamburgers are cooked to 155 degrees Fahrenheit.

Where there are large events with food service, have the event catered by a commercial caterer (you can contact the local health department to find out if the business or person is permitted) or for fairs and carnivals, contact the local health department and advise them of the event, requesting them to permit the food booths as Temporary Food Establishments.

For Field Trips, avoid any non-commercial sources of food. (If visiting a dairy farm, do not allow the children to drink raw milk) Have coolers with containers of frozen water in which to put the children's bagged lunches or order lunches such as peanut butter and jelly sandwiches that do not require refrigeration.

Encourage parents to insert in children's bagged lunches from home, a means of maintaining cold or hot food temperature.

Lastly, please consult with your local health department's food safety staff over any food event. We all want to keep the children safe and food safety specialists can help you accomplish this task.

**cc:** Environmental Health Directors, Supervisors and Coordinators

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